And Then There Were None

by QuizzicalQuinia

Summary

Brienne Tarth receives a mysterious New Year's Eve summons from the dead Catelyn Stark's solicitor. Upon arrival at the remote Eyrie Lodge, Brienne learns that she is the last of ten guests invited under false pretenses, and one of the others is the man she left out of fear, Jaime Lannister. When guests begin to die, Brienne must realize what really matters as she and Jaime struggle to survive.

Based on Agatha Christie's "And Then There Were None."

Notes

This takes place in a modern Westeros, but at a time before mobile phones and security cameras. Think late 50s/early 60s.

Warning for some violence...it's a murder mystery after all ;-) 

Beta'd by the fantastic Mikki!
And Then There Were None

The gondola lurched as the grips rolled over the rails of a mountain support tower, and Brienne nearly fell backwards over her suitcase. She thrust out an arm, her hand spread against a glass wall as the vast expanse of white beneath the car seemed as if it would swallow her whole.

She’d never seen the Vale before. It was supposed to rife with green valleys and sea views, and hearty peoples who loved tradition and tending sheep. But all she saw in every direction were white-capped crags and lonely evergreens that had managed to withstand frequent avalanches.

There had been only one old man tending the gondola station, still called the Bloody Gate though it hadn’t been used as a guard post for centuries. Brienne wondered how anyone had managed the climb to the Eyrie before the gondolas were installed. It seemed a daunting venture as it was, stuck in a tiny glass box suspended above the earth.

She steadied herself and soon caught sight of the station at the top, though it still seemed so far away. The wooden structure hovered over a sheer drop with only steel beams driven into the rock to keep it from falling.

The rustle of paper sounded as she crossed her arms over her chest, padded by her thick winter coat. She drew the invitation from her pocket and read it for the hundredth time, asked herself the same questions for the hundredth time. *Why would Catelyn Stark’s solicitor have waited two years to tell her that she’d been left something in the will? Why would Catelyn leave her something after what had happened? Why was this old news suddenly so imperative that she had to be summoned to the nearly inaccessible Eyrie Lodge in the middle of winter to receive her due?*

It was absurd. Brienne felt uneasy about it, deep in her gut, but that old connection to Catelyn wouldn’t allow her to ignore the summons. She wondered if she would ever be rid of the guilt. She knew she wouldn’t.

Irritation was a better focus than guilt, so Brienne allowed herself to grimace and curse under her breath at the summons. She was missing New Year’s Eve with her father for this. He wasn’t getting any younger, and he was all she had, after what she had done. That was a different kind of guilt, not born of terrible circumstance but the result of choice. She had chosen to be alone. She regretted it every day, even though she knew it wouldn’t have turned out differently despite what *he* had said.

The gondola slowed, easing itself into its nest of wire and gears. It shuddered to a halt. Brienne lifted her suitcase and waited a minute, but no attendant appeared to open the door. She did it herself, gingerly stepping out of the still-swinging car and releasing her held breath once she was on solid ground. The covered station soon gave way to a snowy path surrounded by rock. There was no one around.

The wind blew her hood back and stung her eyes, and she hurried along around a bend. The narrow path opened into a small plain, and on the other side, the entrance to a stone bridge leading to Eyrie Lodge. Brienne stared at the bridge for a long while, the stones of the low side walls showing clear signs of disrepair and the wind rippling over the top as even birds struggled to stay in flight. She did
not relish the prospect of crossing it, but there was no choice unless she abandoned the solicitor’s request and stepped right back onto the gondola. She wondered how it was meant to return to the Bloody Gate when there was no attendant. Perhaps he was in the lodge, staying warm in this freezing weather.

She gripped her suitcase more tightly and moved at a brisk pace to the bridge, not hesitating when it began and the solid ground ended. Her height did her no favors against the wind, her body lurching close to the left side wall as she fought angry gusts. Halfway over, she spotted a light in a window, then several more. Finally, there were people, and she hurried even more until the bridge faded away and she stood at the huge double doors of the lodge’s entrance.

She knocked. She wasn’t even sure the sound could be heard inside since the walls of the old structure remained boulder-thick. Any number of renovations hadn’t changed that. A tiny brass button was next to one of the doors, set into the stone. It hadn’t been polished in so long she’d nearly missed it. She heard an insistent clang through the wooden doors as her finger lifted from the button, and it wasn’t long until a panel set into the right door swung open.

A man stood just inside, grimacing at her as he looked up. “Another one? Wonderful.”

“Wh…what do you mean?” she stuttered, nerves and cold slowing her speech.

“Oh, just come in.” He stepped back and gestured for her to step through the panel.

It was too small for her ungainly body, and she had to turn sideways and duck, squeezing through as the wood brushed her spine and her breasts. She grumbled.

The man closed the panel behind her, and it wasn’t much warmer inside than out. The gray stone of the entrance hall stretched high above, and she could see through a glass skylight that it was dusk now.

“Are you—”

“No, I’m not the caretaker or the innkeeper or the host. No, I don’t who know you are or why you’re here, and I don’t care. This is bloody insanity, that’s all. Just come with me and hope to the Seven you’re the last or else we won’t have enough food to go ‘round.” The man marched off before his last word was even finished, heading down a hall extending from the entry.

Brienne followed, but she switched her suitcase to her left hand and picked up a heavy candlestick along the way. If he wasn’t Catelyn’s solicitor, who was he? Why didn’t he expect her?

There was a light at the end of the hall, radiating from an open door where a cacophony of voices flooded out. There had to be at least five people in there, some arguing, some placating. Her greeter went right in, and she hesitated in the doorway, still clutching the candlestick as she surveyed what seemed to be a plush drawing room with high windows and gold accents everywhere.

Her greeter went straight to a rolling liquor cart under one window. Some of the voices quieted as their bearers spotted her. Suitcases littered the perimeter and coats and other outdoor protection were strewn about as a roaring fire kept this room much warmer. There was a grouping of divans and armchairs around the fire, though plenty of standing space remained. More chairs rested against the walls, and to the right where no one stood was a table with an old gramophone on it.

Besides the surly man from the door, Brienne counted seven other people, two women and five men. The older woman who seemed to possess a very shrill, demanding voice had been arguing with two of the men before they’d seen Brienne. She was bottle-blonde and plump, her hair elaborately coiffed
under a hat with a stuffed bird on it. Her crimson lips twisted down as she looked at Brienne. The two men with her wore matching expressions of apathy, both holding brandy glasses and cigarettes.

The only other woman was young and exotic as if she’d come from Dorne, where she’d lain on a beach for days and days. Some of the men were looking only at her, with her long dark hair draped over one shoulder and her hips on display in slim black trousers. She was the opposite of Brienne.

One man was incredibly old with stooped shoulders and a long, ragged white beard. His eyes though…they were not old. They settled on Brienne for a split second, and she could tell that this man was sharp as a tack despite the posture of his body. Another middle-aged man stood by himself in a corner, his face and hands scarred.

The last man was nearly shouting, his oily voice a match for the slick surface of the bridge outside. But wait…he was speaking to someone, had been the whole time, so her count had been wrong. There was another person.

She finally stepped into the long room, setting her suitcase near the door but keeping hold of the candlestick. She turned to face the fire as the people were closer to it, and saw a niche to its left that held a piano, several bookcases, and the tenth person in the room who leaned against the piano and had been obscured from her position in the doorway. She dropped the candlestick.

The metal clanged against the parquet floor, leaving a nice gouge as the sound ended the argument of the wiry gravel man and him. They both saw her then, but she only saw Jaime Lannister whose strong shoulders still looked the same encased in a fine suit, whose long fingers wrapped around his tumbler as they had wrapped around the wheel of the car he’d driven her in for so many months. Whose green eyes fixed on her as if they would pierce her skin, as they had always done.

His hair was shorter. He was thinner. He looked at her the same. The furrow between his brows was new, and it grew deeper with every passing second. She looked away as the wiry man stepped forward.

“Are you alone?” he asked, though it should be obvious as there wasn’t anyone with her.

“What does that matter?” she replied, refusing to look at Jaime, though she felt his eyes on her still. She wondered if it might be her imagination.

“We all arrived alone. There is a pattern. We must know if you fit the pattern.” The man’s voice began to drip honey, a sweet persuasion she wasn’t buying.

And she wouldn’t contribute to whatever game they were all playing. Why was Jaime here? “Who are we?”

“Ah yes,” the wiry man said with an apologetic crooked smile. “The questions. Shall we begin?” He addressed the room.

Her greeter with the liquor sighed deeply and moved to join the group. “The bloody questions. I am Jorah Mormont. I arrived this morning at eight. There was no one here. This room was the only one unlocked. There was food and drink. My invitation was from my…from an employer requesting a meeting.”

“Oh come, Mormont. You’ve said it nine times already.” The platinum-haired woman faced Brienne. “We’ve all seen the invitations. He was invited by his employer all right, only it’s a woman he fancies, and he thought she asked him here for a bit of fun. Pathetic, I say.”

“Yes, we know what you say, you old bitch.” The younger man near her swigged his drink and
scowled. “Your turn anyway, speaking o’ pathetic.”

She pushed him almost into the fire, but he only laughed and drank and sucked on his cigarette.

The woman straightened her hat. “Sybell Spicer, I arrived at nine. Mormont here met me at the door and led me here. Thought he was going to murder me, I did, but we’ve just been drinking. My invitation was from my daughter. We’re…estranged.”

The laughing young man was next. “Theon Greyjoy. Ten o’clock, invited by my uncle for a gambling party. Fuck it, I wanted cash.”

The older man who had been standing with him and the woman smacked him on the back of the head before speaking. “Ryman Frey, eleven, invited to hunt game birds.”

“How is ridiculous. How could you believe there was game up here?” The young woman spoke up. “No matter. Arianne Martell, noon, meant to meet a friend for a skiing holiday.” She glanced over at Jaime, her black-lined eyes clearly skimming his body.

Brienne tensed and slowly turned her head to look at him, because she had to. She wasn’t certain if anyone here knew of her acquaintance with Jaime, and perhaps Jaime wouldn’t want them to know. Perhaps she’d done enough damage for that.

He grinned. It was cold. “Jaime Lannister, one o’clock. My mysterious summons was from my brother.”

That wouldn’t mean anything, at least not to them. It did to her. She felt her lips part from the shock, her gaze fixed on his, and then his grin was just slightly less cold.

Jaime’s brother Tyrion had abandoned him, blaming him for something their father had done without Jaime’s knowledge. But Jaime had always hoped they could reconcile. He loved his brother. It was one of the things that defined him. Brienne of all people knew how much that invitation would have meant to him, and how much it must hurt him now to know it was false.

Her own invitation was false, too. She didn’t know what that meant.

The very old man stroked his beard, and she forced herself to turn to him. “Doctor Pycelle, two o’clock. I was asked by a patient to tend him up here.” He pointed to the scarred man in the corner. “That there is Ilyn Payne, arrived at three. He has no tongue, though we don’t know why. He was invited to interview for a job as caretaker here.”

“And that leaves me,” the wiry man spoke again. “Petyr Baelish, four o’clock. My invitation requested my presence for the reopening of this place.” He laughed a sharp, humorless laugh. “You see, I’m part owner. Isn’t that hilarious? Invited to your own holding by your supposed business partner.”

“Yes, imagine that,” Jaime spoke up.

“Is that what you were arguing about?” Brienne asked, looking at Petyr and not Jaime.

“Certainly. You see, he,” Petyr pointed at Jaime who maintained his twisted grin, “doesn’t believe I am as clueless as everyone else if I have a vested interest here. How could I possibly be in the dark about this insane gathering? Of course, it doesn’t matter to him that I know nothing.”

If Jaime questioned this man, there would be a valid reason. He might be irksome and arrogant, spontaneous to the point of idiocy sometimes, but Jaime wasn’t suspicious without reason.
"Well, what about you?" Theon Greyjoy asked, his thin lips wrapped around another newly-lit cigarette.

"Oh, yes." Brienne reached into her pocket and fingered her invitation.

"Put it there," Jorah said, pointing to a pile of the papers on a low end table.

That’s why Jaime hadn’t lied about his invitation. They were all in the open, a fact which Brienne greatly regretted as she’d have to share the truth of hers. She looked at no one as she moved to add her paper to the pile.

"Brienne Tarth, and…I suppose it’s five?"

"Five twenty now," Jaime muttered.

"All right, five twenty. I was invited by a solicitor who wrote that I had been left something by…someone who died."

"Ah, money! Good. Thought I was the only one." Theon grinned.

"No, it’s not like that," Brienne insisted.

"Never is. You probably need the cash though. No sugar daddy for you." Theon moved to refill his drink.

"Keep your mouth shut, or I’ll do it for you." Jaime’s voice was deep and steady, his steely gaze enforcing the threat of violence.

Theon shut it.

Brienne felt her hated blush begin its bloom, but she was saved by the Doctor.

"Well, my dear, now we wait. You see, many hours have passed, and it was decided that we make no move until the…guests, cease to appear. We assume whatever reason we are here will be revealed at that point, and we may act accordingly."

Jaime threw his hand up. He’d set his drink down, and Brienne wondered if he’d made any progress in his acclimation. Of course he had. It had been twenty-two months since she’d seen him.

"Waiting is the worst thing we could possibly do, can’t you all see that?" he was nearly shouting as he had been when she’d entered. "Whoever has managed this sick ruse is clearly organized. He or they, whoever, knows us all. They knew how to invite each of us to get us here with certainty. Does no one else find that prospect just a tad unsettling?"

Brienne did. More than unsettling, frightening. In her case, it meant that their host was aware of her relationship with Catelyn Stark, not the public tale of the girls’ kidnappings, the private tale. The one after. The one when she’d failed and Catelyn had gone mad. No one knew about that. No one but Jaime.

Anyone else might have wondered if Jaime were involved. The idea didn’t even cross her mind. If Jaime wanted something, whether vengeance or a chocolate bar, he would simply take it. Plotting like this wasn’t his style, and he would be genuinely wounded by the disappointment of not seeing his brother. Of course it wasn’t Jaime.

Petyr Baelish’s lips parted, but just then, a low whirring noise sounded from the other side of the
room. She turned, as they all did. The gramophone she’d noticed earlier had begun to play a record. No one had been there, no one could have turned it on. She glanced at Jaime without thought, and he met her gaze instantly with a raised brow.

The whirring turned into static, then the clearing of a throat. The voice was raspy and deep, obviously disguised, though it sounded nothing like any of the voices she’d heard here so far.

“Dear guests,” the voice pronounced with some kind of glee. “I am very glad you all received your invitations and wisely chose to accept them. It was imperative that you arrive here of your own volition and in safety. I do apologize for any dashed hopes.”

The voice cleared its throat again and went on, “You see, you all have something in common that is quite…amusing. Rare even. You are all murderers.” The voice paused for dramatic effect, though no encouragement was needed.

All around her, Brienne heard gasps and cries, angry shouts and stifled moans. And silence. To her right where Jaime stood, utter silence. She joined him in this. She didn’t question the truth of the voice’s claim. She knew it to be true already. She herself was a murderer after all. And so was Jaime.

The voice continued with just a hint of smugness. Or so Brienne believed. “Murder is a criminal act. Taking a life is the gravest injustice, and yet, all of you have gone unpunished for your crimes. Some were wrongly acquitted, some pardoned, some never caught or tried at all. Is life so worthless that it can be ended without repercussion? No, it cannot. There must be consequence for crime, and appropriate punishment for criminals. In the case of murder, the punishment can only be death.”

So this was the purpose. Brienne supposed her heart might have sunk further in her chest if she had not already been so tense, if she had not already suspected a grave strangeness to their situation the moment she entered the room. The fingers of her right hand twitched, longing to stretch themselves and find Jaime’s own hand, but she kept them still.

“Yes, dear guests. You will all die.”

More gasps, more cries of outrage. Brienne’s side warmed as Jaime stepped close, just enough that their fingers brushed. What was the point of pretending when they’d just been sentenced to death? She felt numb. Later, maybe minutes or an hour, she would collect herself and remember that she’d have to plan something. She’d have to leave this place immediately, somehow. But for now, numbness kept her from splitting into pieces. It was what Jaime was doing even now, she knew that. He’d taught her after all. Go away inside when the fear or the pain was too much to bear.

The voice laughed in its tinny, recorded way. “Let’s make a bit of fun out of this, shall we? You all intended to be here to welcome the New Year, so full of promise and renewed purpose. What if you never see it, hmm? It seems only right that your last hours in this world are spent in fun. Let’s have a party, beginning at once. Right now. A New Year’s Eve party with games, food and drink, and merriment.”

A wooden chest popped open, its lid hitting the wall behind it. Nearly everyone jumped, and Sybell Spicer choked on air. Inside the chest were party hats and horns, rattles and toy drums, and rolls of streamers. Brienne grimaced at the twisted props.

“And what New Year’s Eve party is complete without a countdown?”

On the far wall, another whirring sounded, and a panel in the middle of the decorated wall moved. It seemed to be on a turntable, and in its place appeared a golden frame with a poem or some other words in it. Beneath the frame on a half-moon shelf were tiny figurines that looked like they held
axes and wore hoods. Executioners, Brienne realized. She counted. Ten little executioners.

“Here is our countdown, not one of time but one of justice. By the New Year, midnight, you will all be dead. Keep count, and you will know how little time you have left to live.”

Sybell Spicer fainted. Arianne Martell began to cry, or so Brienne thought as it seemed to be a woman’s voice, but it was Theon Greyjoy who choked on strangled sobs. Doctor Pycelle sat heavily on a divan. Brienne’s hand was filled with warmth and strength, and she looked down to see Jaime’s fingers twined with hers so briefly she might have imagined it. She didn’t, she knew. He let go and stepped toward the gramophone.

The record had stopped spinning. It was over. She moved to the frame on the wall as Jaime joined her, and several others. Probably Petyr Baelish and Ryman Frey.

It was a poem, of sorts, though written by an unskilled hand and clearly intended for them.

Ten little murderers charged with a crime;
One choked himself to death and then there were nine.

Nine little murderers sat up very late;
One overslept himself and then there were eight.

Eight little murderers looked to the heavens;
One said he’d stay there and then there were seven.

Seven little murderers chopping up sticks;
One chopped himself in halves and then there were six.

Six little murderers staying full alive;
A wasp went and stung one and then there were five.

Five little murderers digging through the floor;
One lost his footing and then there were four.

Four little murderers trying hard to flee;
A red herring swallowed one and then there were three.

Three little murderers warming up the stew;
A big bear hugged one and then there were two.

Two little murderers sitting in the sun;
One betrayed the other, and then there was one.

One little murderer left all alone;
He went out and hanged himself and then there were none.
Chapter 2

_This could be the last time I look at him. This could be the end_, Brienne thought as her gaze swiftly moved from the poem to Jaime’s face.

She’d never let herself consider that she’d made a mistake in letting him go those twenty-two months ago. She’d been certain he’d tire of her, that he couldn’t really want her. Not her. It was only what they’d been through, and he’d leave her more broken than she already was.

Looking at him now, she began to doubt her choice as she never had before. It was there, in his beautiful eyes. He was absolutely terrified, and it wasn’t for himself. He was never afraid for himself. _He’s afraid...for me._

It felt as if they were still on the road, that there were no months of separation and no agonizing decision to leave him. She had torn them apart before they were ever truly together, all out of fear, but the only fear now was losing him again. She couldn’t let that happen before she told him how sorry she was.

“Look here.” Petyr Baelish’s voice shattered her focus.

She wanted to hit him right in his smug little mouth. Jaime stepped over to Petyr without another look, but she could tell by his clenched fist and the way his shoulders squared that his mind remained on the poem and their death sentence, and maybe something about her.

Petyr was rummaging through the chest with the party props, Doctor Pyccelle and Arianne Martell hovering close.

“It looks like an album,” Petyr said, withdrawing a black leather-bound volume from the chest.

Brienne moved behind Petyr before the others could, so she might get a good look over his shoulder. She wanted to smile to herself as Jaime did the same, but she couldn’t quite manage.

Everyone but Sybell and Theon gathered around as Petyr opened the album’s cover. The first page was clean and white, a thick sort of paper with an expensive texture. A neat hand had written _Portraits of Murder_ in red ink. Petyr turned the page.

“So it’s true, then,” Pycelle muttered.

Ryman added, “You knew it was.”

“Except it’s not.” Jorah Mormont’s voice was steel. “I am no murderer. I’ve never killed anyone.”

“You face is here.” Petyr peered at Jorah, pointing a long, too-delicate finger to a newspaper clipping of Jorah pasted on the left-hand page.

There were four clippings visible, two on each page. The first of Jorah under a headline _Forest Ranger Accused of Murdering Estranged Wife_. The next clipping was a photograph of said wife, a lovely dark-haired sprite with an impish grin. She’d been a dancer apparently.

“Accused,” Jorah ground out. “I was accused. I didn’t do it.”

“That’s not important.” Jaime’s voice had returned to its slightly snide intonation. “Whoever’s
arranged all this thinks you did. That’s all that matters.”

“My innocence matters to me.” Jorah moved away to refill his drink yet again.

“I don’t believe we have the luxury of time to dwell on trivialities.” Pyelle’s voice thinned even more.

It was his face in the next clipping. Doctor Death Acquitted.

“I was spared of conviction. My license was revoked and I retired some years ago. It was a patient, you see. Died during a procedure.” Pyelle looked out the window as if he saw his memories playing out as film on the glass.

“Did you kill this patient?” Ryman asked without a hint of sympathy.

“I suppose so. I was drunk. Too much anesthetic. Far, far too much.” Pyelle raised one hand to press against his chest over his thick sweater.

Brienne wondered if he were as frail inside as he appeared to be on the outside. The shock of this alone could do serious damage to his body.

“If anyone’s keeping count, that’s one claim of innocence and one of negligence.” Petyr chuckled for no good reason.

Jaime rolled his eyes. Brienne felt the motion more than saw it as he stood next to her, or maybe she just knew instinctively that’s how he would react.

Petyr turned the pages, again and again until they were all exposed amidst cries of rage and please for belief in some circumstance or another.

Ilyn Payne, judicial executioner who killed the wrong prisoner. A nod of admission.

Theon Greyjoy, killer of one Doctor Luwin up north. A shaking hand and a puff of smoke.

Jaime Lannister, slayer of District Attorney Aerys Targaryen. “You all know I did it. Everyone knows I did it.”

Brienne cringed at his tone, at his continued acceptance of his tainted name when no one knew why he’d done it. No one but her. He’d saved hundreds of lives and lived under the false shame of slaying an employer who had gone mad.

Sybell Spicer, accomplice in plotting to murder Robb Stark to free her daughter from marriage.

Brienne focused on that. She didn’t know Sybell or her daughter, who could only be Jeyne Westerling. This connection to the Starks twisted something in her gut. What were the chances there’d be two of them here? Two murderers of Starks. Though Sybell herself hadn’t killed someone. She’d only planned it, apparently.

“Anything to say?” Petyr asked.

Sybell’s face had gone pale beneath her layers of rouge and powder. She shook her head violently. “Everything I did was for my daughter. Don’t you see? Everything was for Jeyne. I did it for Jeyne.”

Another admission, then.

Petyr Baelish, poisoner of Jon Aryn, the Vale’s governor. “I did it. I poured it right in his drink and
watched him die. Of course, I have no idea how anyone has learned about that, but yes, it’s true.” He grinned at everyone, to Brienne’s utter disgust. “I’m not a very nice man.”

“Then it won’t matter if we kill you ourselves,” Arianne hissed each syllable.

“Since we’ll all soon be dead, no it won’t matter at all.” Petyr’s grin widened.

There was Arianne’s face next. Killer of Arys Oakheart, a guard who worked for her father. They were having an affair. She nodded and walked away.

Ryman Frey who, as a judge himself, ordered Edmure Tully to be hanged for selling secrets during the war. “I ordered it, and I’m proud of it. The little bastard betrayed my family and his own.”

And her face, there on the last page facing no one else. Brienne Tarth, who stabbed Catelyn Stark to death in a cabin close to Pennytree. Sybell Spicer gasped and looked at her. Brienne let her vision fade, focusing on nothing but the shock of how her terrible deed was known when it had never been reported, never printed in the papers or spoken on the radio. She hadn’t even been connected to the death when the police investigated. Jaime had made sure of it. There was nothing to link her to the scene. It had been a burglary gone wrong. That’s what had happened in the eyes of the world.

She felt a heavy cloak of shame weigh down her shoulders, and she couldn’t stop a thin trail of tears from sliding down her cheek. “Yes,” she whispered. “Yes.”

“Then perhaps we are meant to die after all.” Pycelle sank onto the nearest chair as if utterly exhausted.

A loud clang filled the room, the knell of a clock. Brienne thought it must be near the piano as the sound echoed from that space and carried the tinny sound of the instrument’s strings. It struck just once.

As the sound faded, another replaced it, one far more terrible and final. It was Ilyn Payne in the corner, sinking along the walls as his feet gave out, his hands wrapped around his throat as his skin began to turn blue.

“Oh gods, he’s poisoned!” Sybell shrieked.

“No,” Jaime murmured, his voice unusually soft. “He’s choking.”

He rushed over to the poor man, as did Petyr. Pycelle struggled to rise, so Brienne moved to help him, bearing most of his weight as he tried to make it to Ilyn.

The poem, she thought. One choked himself to death, and then there were nine. It was all planned, every bit.

Jaime pulled Ilyn’s hands down as Petry wrestled the dying man to his feet in an attempt to force whatever was choking him out. It wasn’t working.

“Doctor?” Brienne nearly shouted, dragging Pycelle closer.

“I don’t…there is nothing—”

“There is always something that can be done!” Brienne did shout then.

Pycelle went pale enough that she thought he might faint. “Yes, yes…try, can you see an obstruction?”
Jaime spun to face the feeble doctor. “And how the hells am I meant to accomplish that?”

Pycelle was useless, so Brienne pushed him down on a divan and stepped over, prying Ilyn’s jaws apart to peer down his throat.

“Good gods,” she muttered.

The absence of Ilyn’s tongue only allowed her to see how swollen the tissue in his throat had become. She thought she might be watching it grow by the second.

“He isn’t choking on an object, it’s something else. A reaction, a drug…” She stepped back, Ilyn’s lower jaw hanging open as his eyes bugged out.

Petyr held him up, but Jaime stopped trying to intervene. There was nothing that could be done.

“Look away, Brienne,” Jaime said softly without looking at her.

“He deserves better than that,” she whispered back.

She knew the instant Ilyn Payne was dead. The capillaries in his eyes burst, and Petyr dropped him heavily, scrambling backwards toward the fire, anything to move from the body.

“It’s happening,” Sybell cried. “It’s already started. We’re all going to die in this room, surrounded by bodies.”

“No, we are not,” Jaime proclaimed. “At least I’m not.”

He looked straight at Brienne. She could feel his resolve soak into her skin. They moved at the same time, she retrieving the heavy candlestick she’d clutched earlier, and he grabbing a long letter opener from a table.

“What are you doing?” Arianne asked Jaime.

“What does it look like? This lodge is huge, yet we’re confined to one single room? Very convenient for our kind host.” He didn’t glance back as he headed out the door to the cold entry.

Brienne followed and could hear the steps of others as well. She’d be surprised if anyone wanted to wait there with the dead Ilyn.

“I told you everything was locked!” Jorah shouted so the sound would carry through the hall.

“Locks aren’t going to stop me.” Jaime headed to the closest door.

Pycelle’s heavy breathing was the only sound for a split second. “I cannot keep pace with you, I’m afraid. I must rest. I am not afraid of the dead and will wait by the fire, but please…I only ask that you return to tell me what you’ve found.”

“Of course,” Brienne assured him. “We will not leave you there.”

Pycelle’s smile felt genuine, and she returned it. It didn’t matter that he’d killed someone out of negligence. She was in no place to judge.

She’d had barely noticed earlier that the entry was shaped like a semicircle with several doors or halls all around, and a wide staircase at the far end. All was gray and filled with shadows as the only light filtered from the glass skylight. Jaime was busy wedging his letter opener into the space between a door’s frame and its lock, leveraging the thin metal like a crowbar. She stepped close.
“Does it open in or out?” she asked.

“In. I think.” He continued to struggle, one-handed.

“Kick it in.”

His looked at her in exasperation, but she wasn’t sure whether he was more frustrated at his disability or from failing to consider the more violent option before her. He stepped back, and together they braced themselves to kick the door at the same time. The heavy wood shuddered and collapsed a little in the middle. This might just work.

“Again,” Jaime said.

Another kick and the door slammed back against the wall, a splintered panel forming rough stakes that jutted from the frame. Jaime tried the light switch, and the room beyond was illuminated.

“There’s electricity, so the central generator must be working, not just a small one for the drawing room,” Jaime mused.

Petyr moved close, Arianne trailing behind as the rest of the group huddled together, letting the brave or foolish ones make all the moves.

“This is the dining room,” Petyr mumbled.

“You didn’t think to mention that before?” Jaime sneered at him.

Petyr shrugged. “I haven’t been here since the most recent renovation. How should I know what’s been changed?”

“Bureaucrats.” Jaime continued muttering under his breath as he moved into the dining room. “And bloody hells. Just when I thought this couldn’t get more twisted.”

Brienne spotted what Jaime had seen. A long dining table set formally, with white china and gleaming silver. *Happy New Year* was written on gilded centerpieces filled with hothouse flowers. In front of the settings were calligraphy name cards. On each plate were wrapped sandwiches and packaged cookies, like an airline meal, and flutes of what looked like champagne flanked the plates. In each flute was drowned a small executioner figurine, exact matches of those in the drawing room.

“Nine chairs.” Jaime’s voice was soft and slow. His mind was elsewhere, on the next step, the next thing to do, though she was beginning to believe it was all fruitless.

Everyone else entered the dining room. Theon spotted his name card marking the setting closest to the door. He darted toward a potted palm in a corner and vomited.

“They’re poisoned, they must be,” Sybell wailed.

“Of course they’re not poisoned. That’s not how this game works.” Petyr slid forward and grabbed the sandwich from Theon’s plate, ripping it open and sinking his teeth in. “Tasty.”

“And how would you know? Maybe you’re responsible for this,” Arianne accused, pointing at Petyr with her other hand on her hip.

Ryman Frey shoved his fear aside enough to appreciate the view. Brienne grimaced.

“Yes, dear girl. Clearly I’m the culprit since I know much of this place and am unafraid to eat a sandwich. Though I’m not sure how you get around the fact that I arrived after most of you, have my
murderous face plastered in that damned book, and also admitted to my crime. Makes sense, really, if you have no rationality left.”

“I want answers,” Arianne affirmed.

“You want a scapegoat. You want to blame someone.” Petyr loomed over her. “Would it make you feel better to pretend you’ve caught the man responsible? Would you kill me and be done with it? What happens then when another of you dies after I’m dead, too? Who’s the new scapegoat then? I suggest Jaime Lannister.”

“Stop this,” Brienne demanded. “We are all targets. We are all in danger. Bickering helps nothing.”

Her outburst exhausted her. She let her shoulders sink in defeat and moved to find her intended place at the table. It was between Arianne and Pycelle, the poor old man. She picked up the food packages and stuffed into her pockets, unable to eat anything now but knowing she would have to later, if only to keep her wits about her.

As she looked up, she saw Jaime doing the same, and several others, but Sybell Spicker and Theon refused to touch anything. She took Doctor Pycelle’s food to give to him.

“Anyone?” Jaime pointed to the abandoned food. When there was no response, “Fine then, more for me. If it’s poisoned, I’ll die full.”

He spared her a smile when the others weren’t looking. It was half for her, she knew. Two meals each, so they’d at least try to survive. But she didn’t mimic him when he downed a flute of champagne, the executioner falling against his lip. He took it from the flute once he set it down, shoving it in his pocket.

Petyr’s voice filled the space, as if he’d forgotten not to yell as he had at Arianne. “The next room leads to the kitchen and service areas. The two doors on the other side of the entry go to the old throne room and the conservatory. Guest rooms are upstairs.”

Jorah had remained quiet, but his intoxication was beginning to show as he slumped against the wall a little. “Does the kitchen have a freezer?”

“I believe so,” Petyr answered.

“Why?” Arianne asked.

Jorah’s brow rose, and Jaime chuckled, though it was sour.

“Ah.” Petyr smiled widely. “Of course.”

“Are you all mind readers?” Arianne yelled. “I don’t appreciate this cryptic nonsense.”

“Ilyn Payne,” Brienne reminded gently. “So we don’t…”

So we don’t have to look at him anymore. So he has a grave. So we have something to do.

“Oh good gods,” Arianne whispered.

Jaime didn’t hesitate to exit the dining room, skirting the entry walls to the kitchen passage’s door.

“Allow me?” Jorah offered, holding out his hand for the letter opener.

“We’ll probably have to kick it again.” Jaime shrugged as he handed the opener over.
Instead of wedging it in the lock, Jorah, however drunk he was, inserted it expertly into the mechanism and twisted, a clear pop lingering after it was done.

“You can pick locks?” Sybell commented, constantly wiping her brow of nervous sweat that made her powder streak like a sad clown.

“Clearly.”

“Some of us should fetch the body. Wrap it in the rug.” Petyr motioned back to the drawing room.

“And we must tell Doctor Pycelle,” she reminded them.

“I’m not going back in there, and I’m not watching you put that man in a freezer.” Sybell stepped back to lean against a wall, her body rigid in protest.

“Fine, stay out here alone and get slaughtered. Suit yourself.” Ryman moved past Jorah into the passage to the kitchen, switching on a light as he went.

“I’ll go,” Brienne offered, hoping Jaime would also volunteer, but he was eyeing Ryman’s retreating pudge.

He spun to look at her as she began to move away, “No one goes alone. In fact, we divide evenly. Sybell, you’ll just have to find the strength to move your ass or I’ll do it for you.”

Sybell gaped, but no one paid her the slightest attention.

“I agree,” Petyr said. “I will go with Brienne. Jaime, you with Ryman, Arianne, and Sybell. Jorah and Theon, you’re with us, and we bring Pycelle back, too.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Jorah muttered.

They moved to part, but Brienne caught Jaime’s eyes. Be careful, trust no one, come back. She nodded.

The light of the drawing room would be warming and welcome if not for the stench of death. Brienne was as reluctant as Sybell had been to return, but she’d never admit it. With Theon so useless, she’d have to wrap and carry the body with Petyr and Jorah, though Jorah’s weaving steps probably meant there would be only two pallbearers.

Petyr immediately began freeing the old fringed rug from the table atop it, and she went to Doctor Pycelle, who was reclining on the divan nearest the fire. Not even far from the body.

She leaned over him. “Doctor Pycelle? I’m sorry, but you must come with us.”

He didn’t move. No flicker of an eyelid or twitch of a finger as his hands were folded over his chest. His lips were parted. Brienne refused to accept what her eyes told her. She stood tall and spoke so very softly.

“I can’t wake him.”

The sounds of the rug moving ceased. Theon had gone back to the liquor, but Petyr and Jorah stepped close. They likely knew, too.

Petyr jostled the old man’s arm. There was, of course, no response.

“One overslept himself.” Jorah’s fuzzy mind still worked well enough.
Brienne moved back toward the door, instinct urging her to find Jaime at once. Theon had abandoned a civilized tumbler in favor of a gin bottle, swigging straight from it. He pointed at the framed poem.

“Look, the funny little men fell down.”

They hadn’t fallen. Two of the executioner figurines on the narrow shelf below the poem were positioned face down in a neat row of death. Brienne felt a shocking chill bloom inside her chest. They had all been in the entry and then the dining room. She’d seen them, counted them. They were all there. Someone else was in the lodge, someone who had killed Pycelle, likely by suffocation, and then moved the figurines. The someone who had recorded their death sentences. She wasn’t sure why this surprised her. Of course there was someone, their host who had decided to kill them all.

“Jaime!” she shouted as loudly as she could, hardly realizing that she called for him. “Jaime!”

His frantic steps echoed out in the entry. She knew the weight of them, their pace exactly. He rushed into the room with a heaving chest and pupils blown wide. He found her immediately and scanned her head to toe, shoulders easing as he realized she was apparently all right.

“Gods, what is it? What’s happened?”

She glanced toward the divan where Pycelle had met his end. “He was killed, Jaime. While we were out there. And those…” she pointed at the figures.

He took it all in, the others who had been in the kitchen now trickling through the door.

“He was here. Minutes after we left, he was here,” Jaime said.

Sybell Spicer decided at that moment to scream. It was awkward timing, not attached to any particular shock. She’d been present long enough to understand the new death and to hear what Brienne had said. But she screamed anyway.

“I can’t take this,” she howled. “I can’t, I can’t!”

Before anyone could grab her, she darted down the hall to the entry, her steps a cacophony on the stone.

“Where the hells is she off to?” Ryman asked needlessly.

“She probably doesn’t know any more than we do.” Petyr shrugged.

Arianne pointed at the door. “We can’t just leave her out there in the dark.”

“We go together, from now on. No splitting up.” Jaime’s voice was firm and met no argument.

They all moved back to the entry, but Sybell’s steps could be heard no more.

“There.” Arianne turned to the enormous staircase where a beam of moonlight filtered down. “Is that a shoe on the step?”

When they drew closer, they could see it was, and a woman’s shoe at that.

“She must have gone up.” Petyr began to climb swiftly.

At the top of the stairs was a wide semicircle landing with doors extending from the wall side. The guest rooms. The landing turned into a hall that wrapped around the upper floor with the rooms now
above the drawing and dining spaces below. At the end of the hall was a large window, flung open with white curtain whipping about from the wind that rushed through. There was no sign of Sybell.

Brienne stayed back, for once letting someone else be the one to see, because she knew what had happened. Jaime stayed, too. Once more, his hand found hers as they watched everyone else crowd around the window, emitting a mixture of curses and fearful cries.

“One little murderer looked to the heavens,” she murmured.

“Said she’d stay there, and then there were seven,” Jaime echoed, sighing and squeezing her hand. “Well, shall we have a look?”

“I suppose.”

He didn’t let go of her hand as they let the hall swallow them up, both of them so tall they could easily see out the window though the others had front row seats to the spectacle. In the silver moonlight, Sybell Spicer was sprawled on the rocks a hundred feet below the window, her cream colored dress blending into the patches of snow as she became part of the mountain in her death. No one could get to her. It would be her resting place until she was nothing was bones.

Arianne walked away, though not far. Theon vomited out the window.

“Gods, boy, your sick’ll fall on that poor woman,” Jorah chastised, smacking Theon’s shoulder.

Theon’s eyes welled as if he couldn’t keep tears in. “Can’t help it. I’m sorry.”

“Gods, look at this.” Arianne’s voice filtered from behind them, from the middle of the hall.

They moved as one to join her. She stood in front of a guest room door, and hanging on the handle was another hand-written note with a name. *Ryman Frey*. No one spoke as they examined more rooms, all those in this section set aside for them with names on the doors.

“Jorah, were these here when you arrived?” Jaime asked.

“No. They were not.” Jorah shook his head in disbelief.

“I don’t want to go in.” Arianne’s voice shook.

“Well, I do.” Ryman moved to his door and tried the knob. It unlocked. “See that? Meant to be. If I’m going to die anyway, I might as well sleep and have it done with. Won’t even know it’s happening.”

“We agreed not to split up,” Petyr reminded.

“We did not. You did. And I don’t believe for one second that one of you isn’t in on this. How else do you explain that our every step is known? No thank you, I’ll chance it on my own. Lock myself in here and wait it out.”

Everyone remained silent for just a moment. Jaime dropped her hand and stepped toward Ryman. “Suit yourself. But if we find a way out, no one’s coming back for you.”

“I wouldn’t come back for you, so that sounds about right. Good night, all. Or is it *good death*?” He grinned and disappeared into the room marked for him.

Brienne wondered if they would see him again and found she didn’t care. She only cared about Jaime’s hand in hers, so she found it again and didn’t care who saw.
“What now? What can we possibly do?” Arianne rubbed her hands up and down her arms as if to warm herself.

“We get out.” Jaime was resolute, standing tall with his back to Ryman’s door. “We bundle up and head down the mountain.”

“We can’t all fit in the cable car. Who gets to decide? You?” Jorah complained, his words still slurring.

“Yes, me. Are there any rational objections to that, or are you just worried I’ll leave you here to die?” Jaime glared at them all, save Brienne.

She stood so close, and the light was so dim, that she could keep hold of him without notice. At least, she didn’t think anyone noticed, though she wouldn’t be surprised if that shrewd little Petyr Baelish had already realized she and Jaime had prior acquaintance.

“No one gets left behind…besides Ryman,” Petyr added. “He gets what he asked for, and I for one think your plan is sound. It might be freezing out there, and we might not even make it, but even that slim chance is better than staying here.”

Jaime waited for reluctant nods from the others. “Right, down to the drawing room for our things. Petyr, you and Jorah take the lead. I’ll follow behind, with the women and Theon in the middle.”

Jorah glanced at her as if he wondered how she could be bundled into the weaker woman role with Arianne, but she didn’t meet his gaze. Let him think what he would, she knew Jaime was keeping her with him in the rear so the others could be more easily observed. And she wanted to laugh that Theon was stuck with Arianne, which was far more appropriate based on his behavior.

Their pace was quick down the hall and staircase, but Jaime slowed for a few moments as they crossed the entry. He whispered so the sound wouldn’t echo between the stones. “Don’t leave my sight. Not for one second.”

“I don’t intend to.” She hoped her low response carried the weight of heavier things. She didn’t know if they’d have a real chance to speak. His eyes on her made her skin hot.

“I’m not going in again. They’re both dead in there.” Arianne sounded as if she were about to cry as she faltered in the drawing room doorway.

“Then stay out here alone. No one will coddle you now if you start acting like Ryman.” Jaime dragged Brienne past Arianne’s quivering body, but the girl’s light steps followed almost immediately.

The light of the room seemed almost glaring after the dimness before, and Brienne squinted as she moved to her suitcase. Everyone intently avoided the bodies slumped by the fire.

She’d never taken her heavy coat off, and her scarf and gloves were stuffed in the pockets, but she might need more. She popped her case open to retrieve a thicker sweater than the one she wore, as well as a box of crackers she’d kept for the plane. A lighter, extra socks, and a ski cap were added to her pile, and her mother’s tiny book of ancient poems because she couldn’t bear to leave it behind.
All else could be forgotten in minutes.

When she looked up, Jaime and Jorah had stripped off their dress shirts and were pulling on heavy sweaters over their white undershirts. Petyr had already worn warm garb, but he added the same accessories Brienne had in her pockets. Theon and Arianne had pulled on nice coats and that was all.

“You're going to freeze,” she told them.

“I… I don’t have anything else.” Arianne looked about to cry again.

Brienne sighed and pulled a second sweater from her case. Nothing else could possibly fit the small woman, but she tossed it over anyway. Petyr had found something better for Theon, and Jaime couldn’t be seen. A rush of anxiety flooded her chest until she forced herself to take a deep breath.

He was just in the piano alcove. Just right there. She could hear him moving about.

It wasn’t enough just to hear him. And hadn’t he told her to stay in sight? She stepped over quickly with her chosen items and watched him switch his dress trousers for thick ski pants. He’d been prepared for the weather at least, and he stuffed all his stolen sandwiches and a torch into a rucksack.

“There’s space here. Give me your things,” he muttered.

When he’d stuffed everything else inside, she handed over her book. He brushed his thumb over the cover as his eyes clouded. “I remember this. It was always with you.”

“Jorah, help me. He’s so drunk he can’t get his arms in, though you’re not much better.” Petyr’s voice filled the room behind her.

Arianne said something about help as well, so the four others were gathered on the far side by the executioner figures. She was as alone with Jaime as she was could be here.

“I’m sorry,” she burst out, her voice so low she could barely hear it herself.

He moved further into the alcove where the light barely reached. She followed as his gaze didn’t leave her face.

He was silent a moment, then, “I loved you.”

Her eyes welled in pain. *Loved.* Past tense. She’d been so stupid, just as she had always been told. She’d ruined it all. She turned her back to him immediately and braced one hand on the piano.

She choked back her tears and made herself stand at her full height. “I didn’t understand. I’m sorry if I caused you pain.”

She was in terrible pain herself. Yes, they might not even live to see the sunrise, but that fear felt small and unworthy of attention as she let the reality of her mistake sink in. The problem was that she believed him, for once. She had been loved. *Her.* She wanted to be grateful for that because she knew with certainty that even if she lived, it would never happen again. But there was no gratitude. Only misery. She let her lids fall shut.

His breath pushed out in a gust. “There was no if. But gods help me, I love you still.”

Her eyes popped open, and she felt herself being spun around by a strong hand gripping her arm, and then her back was against a bookcase, and his body pressed against hers. He kissed her, hard and confident, not like it had been the very few times before. So few times, full of awkwardness and doubt. It was over in seconds.
His lips still brushed hers as he spoke, roughly. “I will not let you die.”

She knew what he meant. He had not said they would not die. She knew him too well.

“I will not let you die, Jaime.” She glared at him with as much conviction as she could manage.

The sounds of the others were beginning to break through. He claimed one last kiss and stepped back. “Then I suppose we’ll just have to outrun the bear.”

His grin was cocky and mean. He meant that, too. He would easily let the others die if it meant saving her. She let the idea of it, of being that important to him wash over her and firm her resolve to live through this, so she could have him and never again be so stupid. But she made the pleasure his violent intent caused fade. She couldn’t in good conscience allow anyone to be sacrificed for her. They would all have to get out.

Her heart was pounding as she slipped on her gloves and scarf, winding it around her neck and picking up Jaime’s rucksack. If she didn’t have something to carry, she was afraid her hands would shake the whole way. They didn’t look at each other as they moved out of the alcove to find the others nearly ready, Petyr’s arms crossed over his chest and his foot tapping impatiently.

“Let’s get moving,” Jaime commanded, though there was a slight tick at the corner of his lips as if he were about to grin and was trying very hard not to.

This time, he led the way as she kept pace with him, but as they were nearly out of the drawing room, she stole a glance back at the executioners. One more was laying down, one more for Sybell Spicer. Ryman must still be alive, or at least their host hadn’t had the chance to alter his macabre display again.

She didn’t look back again. They reached the large front doors, and Jaime pulled on the panel she’d stepped through when she’d arrived. It was stuck, maybe frozen from the cold. She moved to help, and together they managed to pry it open until it slammed against the door itself.

Immediately, Theon rushed forward and sucked in deep gulps of frigid winter air. If they had any luck at all, he wouldn’t vomit again. She moved after him with Jaime just behind, their group trailing single file out of the lodge’s deathtrap.

Why were they being allowed to leave? If all it took to avoid their host’s sentence was a trek outdoors in the dark, they should have left the instant the gramophone had stopped playing. No, it couldn’t be that easy.

“Was this here before?” Theon asked, sounding slightly more sober. He pointed to a stack of logs just to the side of the front steps, a light dusting of snow on them.

“If they were, I didn’t notice,” Petyr replied.

Theon stepped closer to the logs just as she heard Jaime muttering something.

She moved closer to him. “What—”

His gaze flew to Theon’s back, launching himself down the steps in one smooth motion. “No! Don’t —”

Theon bent over the logs. The rhyme…she remembered. One little murderer chopping up sticks.

She grabbed hold of Jaime’s coat, yanking him back just as something swung through the night air
over the logs. It must have been attached to the lodge somehow, waiting to be released, the enormous double-sided axe that found its home in Theon Greyjoy’s chest. Arianne screamed.

He was pinned to the ground as a crimson blanket spread itself around him on the snow. It had been a merciful death at least. Instant.

“One chopped himself in halves and then there were six.” The words stuck in her throat, threatening to choke her like Ilyn Payne.

It was getting close now. Almost halfway.

Jaime stared at Theon’s face for one, two, three seconds. And then he marched off over the snow-covered expanse between the lodge and the bridge, never looking back. His hand trailed behind him just slightly, waiting for her. She made sure she caught up and walked close enough so he’d hear her steps and feel her breath on his neck. That was important.

Arianne was openly weeping now, clutching Petyr’s arm as if she could fall without the support. She probably would. They moved as one until the narrow bridge entrance made them pause.

“It’s going to fall,” Arianne shrieked. “He’s going to blow it up!”

“No.” Jaime shook his head. “He can’t. Unless he plans on dying here with us, he’s got to have a way out for himself. This is it.”

Nevertheless, he examined the sides of the bridge as far as he could see before bracing himself and looking at her. “Fast, yes? As fast as you can.”

She nodded and tightened the rucksack straps, lining up just behind him. He took off, a streak in the darkness as he darted across the stones. She followed right on his heels and could only hope the others didn’t wait to imitate them.

She fully expected the bridge to collapse under her despite Jaime’s assertion, so the relief she experience once her heavy boots found solid ground once more was profound. She clutched Jaime’s arms, their chests heaving from the sprint and more from nerves.

“I never have to explain myself to you.” He grinned at her. “I’m glad for that.”

She just squeezed his hand, lamenting the loss of his warmth through their gloves. Petyr joined them, dragging Arianne with him, and Jorah was on their tail. No one fell from the bridge.

“It’s going to be a wasp,” Jorah said, huffing. “Remember?”

“There are no wasps, idiot. It’s the middle of winter. Besides, the rhyme isn’t quite that literal.” Jaime scoffed and began marching off again.

No, not literal, but there was some semblance of accuracy in the poem’s predictions. They had all come true in some fashion, and Brienne wondered how their host had ensured that outcome. Did he plan how each of them would die and manipulated the timing, or did he simply establish the methods of death, no matter who met them?

Jaime let the others move ahead of him, so she stuck close to hear what he wanted to say.

“It’s too easy.”

Just as she had thought herself. “I know.”
“The gondola won’t work, or something will happen to stop us from getting that far,” he mused aloud.

She glanced at him. “You were never planning on using it.”

He shook his head, adopting a sly grin. “That’s why I wanted extra sandwiches.”

She understood, though it was a crazy plan. “Jaime, we won’t make it down the mountain. We’ll freeze.”

He stopped in his tracks, grabbing her arm and standing so close their breaths became one cloud hovering between them. “We have to try. We’re both strong. We have food. It was done in the old days, and if some feckless peasant could do it, so can we.”

“It wasn’t done in the old days in winter.”

He grimaced, but his gaze was soft. “I told you I wouldn’t let you die. I mean it. Brienne, we have to try.” He was almost pleading.

She had no better idea, and she was loathe to return to the lodge. “All right. We’ll try.”

He grabbed her hand, and they quickly caught up to the others, just rounding the bend to spot the cable car station. There was no car.

Arianne sank to the snow and covered her face with her gloved hands.

“You knew this,” Jorah accused, glaring at Jaime.

“Suspected, not knew. We’re going to walk.”

“We won’t survive it,” Petyr warned.

“We won’t survive here. Take your pick.” Jaime clearly didn’t want to waste time in bickering for once.

He moved toward the station, stepping carefully and scanning the area. Brienne could only think about Theon and the quick-falling axe, and she found herself disgusted as she wished Jorah or Petyr would be the one to investigate, in case there was a trap. She was as bad as Jaime.

A sound echoed from beyond the station, between the craggy mountain slopes. It was sharp and instant, dying quickly in the stillness. Then there was a low rumble that turned into a mad clashing of rocks grinding against each other.

“That was a gunshot,” Jorah murmured, eyes wide.

Jaime’s brow furrowed, and then he adopted a pained, infuriated expression as he growled No, no, no over and over. He darted to the edge of the cliff by the station. It would overlook the old trail down, Brienne knew. She’d seen it from above on her way up, dismissing it as an impossible venture. It would be impossible now.

She joined him on the edge to watch rocks fall and fall, piling on the trail until there would be no passage between the tall cliffs, and still they kept falling. He’d planned this, too, the host, the executioner. No getting out, and he’d waited until they could see. It wasn’t enough to do it without witness. They had to see.

He was watching them, out there somewhere, always watching. She couldn’t see the lodge, but she
wondered if someone near the top, in a dark room with a telescope, could possibly see them.

She watched as Jaime let himself soak in frustration for a moment, and then he turned to the station and examined the thick cables leading out in to the ether.

“It could be done, if we were desperate.”

She followed his thinking. “We are desperate.”

He nodded, but his expression was still pained. “It’s still too easy. He’d have thought of it.”

“They might be released from the station once we’re all hanging from them,” she agreed.

It would have been insane anyway, to rig some kind of harness for each of them to slide down the cable as if it were simply a child’s carnival ride. How would they make it over the support stations?

“Released, or…” Jaime trailed off as he bent to pick up a stone.

Everyone watched as he threw it at the cable, missing the first time. Another stone, and he didn’t miss. The cable sparked when the rock hit.

“Electrified.” Petyr’s voice sounded more resigned than she’d yet heard from him.

“I believe now is the time to give up,” Jorah said, not flippantly but with absolute certainty.

“No.” Brienne shook her head, tired and afraid, with raw nerves and the most compelling will to live she’d ever known. “Now is the time to find him.”

Jaime’s gaze flashed to meet hers. He agreed almost immediately. “We find him and we take him out.”

“Even if we do, there’s no getting off this mountain,” Arianne cried.

“Yes there is. The trail is gone, but the station isn’t. He plans on using it, which means he has a way to call the car back. A radio, something.” Jaime began to pace.

“The gramophone, Jaime. The poem and the axe. There must be radio transmitters on them. That’s how he’s worked them,” Brienne thought aloud.

“The figurines were moved by hand,” Petyr added. “And I believe Sybell Spicer was pushed out that window.”

“We already knew he was in the lodge.” Jorah just shook his head in defeat.

“It could be one of us.” Arianne’s whisper nearly floated away without being heard.

Jaime focused on her. “Say that again.”

Arianne’s eyes were so wide they seemed to take over her entire face. Her lips were turning blue from the cold. “It could, after all. If he uses a radio transmitter, it could be in a pocket. He might have been one of us all along. It might be you.”
Jaime burst out laughing. “You poor girl,” he choked out between chuckles. “Of course it’s not one of us.”

His arrogance wasn’t going over well, Brienne could see. She made sure her tone was as soothing as she could manage underneath her own fear. “We were together when Sybell went out the window. And when Doctor Pycelle was…suffocated, or whatever happened. The figurines had been moved when we all returned. And that was a gunshot. None of us fired. There is someone else, Arianne.”

“Ryman Frey could have fired,” Jorah commented offhand.

Jaime had sobered, though reluctantly. “Yes, he could, but he didn’t kill Sybell or Pycelle, and if I remember correctly, he wasn’t standing anywhere near Ilyn Payne when he choked. There is still another party even if Frey is aware of…things.”

“Then we fetch that fat bastard from his room and force him to stay with us, just to be sure.” Petyr’s voice was slick as ever, a hint of danger seeping through.

Jaime nodded in agreement. “We fetch him and we search the place.” Jaime began marching back toward the bridge without a second thought, shouting over his shoulder. “Every inch. It’s old and bound to have boarded-up spaces or even secret niches. Baelish, are you aware of any?”

Petyr was silent for just a moment as they walked, leaving Jorah to drag Arianne. “I know of only one off the old throne room, large enough for a person to hide in, but I can’t see how someone could push Sybell out the window and come back downstairs without being seen. We went after her immediately.”

“Then there are places you don’t know about. Or else this person can fly like a bat,” Jaime grumbled.

Arianne began to laugh, almost sobbing at the same time. “A bat! Imagine that, a flying killer like a vampire. It must be. We’re going to be killed by a ghost.”

“Slap her, she’s hysterical.” Jaime glanced back for a split second. “Or at least pick a mythical creature. Two are improbable.”

Brienne said nothing, trudging behind Jaime as they filed onto the bridge with no thought of dashing this time. There was no point. The lodge loomed too quickly, its windows black and unforgiving. They stopped in silent agreement, bracing themselves to move on, and Brienne glanced at Arianne to see how the poor girl was holding up.

Arianne had buried her face into Jorah’s sleeve as she clutched his arm, and Brienne saw Jorah’s hands clench into fists as his gaze fixed on Theon’s distant body, made visible only by his dark coat and the circle of red around him.

“AAnyone have a drink?” he asked in a tone that was just shy of apologetic.

Petyr halted for a few seconds. “Here.” He handed Jorah a small bottle of bourbon. “Swiped it from the plane.”

“Much thanks.” Jorah gulped the whole thing down in one go, his face turning red despite the cold.
She would think him weak, but if he wanted to drown his fear in drink, she wouldn’t judge. She followed Jaime up the steps as they ignored Theon. She pushed the door panel open easily, turning sideways to step through, but Jaime’s arm shot out to stop her.

“No.” He glared, waiting for her to step back. “Not yet.”

He bent and formed a one-handed snowball, tossing it through the panel and waiting. Again at a different angle, nothing. And again.

“Jaime, if it’s done by transmitter, he won’t trigger it for a snowball. There’s nothing we can do.” She gripped his wrist.

“There is always something we can do. I refuse to believe otherwise.” And with that, he stepped straight through the panel ahead of her.

Panic flooded her chest as she envisioned another axe swinging, or a sword, or a rifle firing from somewhere inside, but there was nothing. She followed him immediately. If possible, the entry had grown even colder than before.

“The throne room then?” Petyr asked, stepping through after Brienne.

“Lead the way.” Jaime gestured, pausing next to Brienne to make sure Jorah and Arianne were inside, too.

Brienne pushed them in front of her, just in case Arianne slipped or Jorah became too drunk to support her. She’d do it herself, but she wanted her arms free to grab Jaime if he did something reckless again. She knew he would, it was just a matter of when.

They crossed the entry to the side where they had opened no doors, and Petyr tried the largest set. Still locked. Maybe they weren’t meant to enter that yet, a good sign, she supposed.

“Still have that letter opener?” Jaime asked Jorah.

The ranger’s cheeks were even redder now, and his eyes glazed a bit from the bourbon. He shook his head.

“Seven hells,” Jaime muttered.

She stepped forward and kicked, both Petyr and Jaime joining her. This door was far more stubborn, but after enough battering, it gave despite their sore muscles and heavy breathing.

Petyr rested his hands on his knees for a moment, gasping for air. “This is ridiculous.”

Jaime rolled his eyes and entered the throne room. Brienne hadn’t expected such a vast space, though it could be seen from the outside. The round room was enormous, with a vaulted dome ceiling and a wide open area nestled between two curving staircases that led to an upper balcony, where the throne would have been, she assumed. In the middle of the lower level was a circular half-wall with a space cut into it, barred by a velvet-covered rope.

“The Moon Door,” Petyr mumbled. “He should have just bundled us all through it and called it a day.”

Arianne shivered and wouldn’t look at it.

“Right, that hidden niche?” Jaime reminded, glaring impatiently at Petyr.
Petyr shifted his gaze from the strange door and moved to a side wall where narrow alcoves were placed between each column that supported the upper level. “Statues were here, back then.”

He pulled on a carved piece of molding, and the back of one alcove swung away to reveal a dark space behind. It could conceal a person, if that person were small and unafraid of spiders. The whole niche seemed to be covered in old, sagging webs, a cloud of dust released as the panel settled.

“Well, no one’s used that in ages.” Petyr stepped closer, peering inside.

“Worth a try,” Jaime mumbled as he turned to examine the rest of the room.

Petyr stepped further into the niche, his feet crossing the threshold into the webs, and among their tatty clear ropes she spotted a glint, like a miniscule camera’s flash so instant she thought she imagined it. She didn’t.

As Petyr stood in the entry to the niche, a low whoosh sounded from inside. She froze in place, though she wanted to dart over and see if the glint had indeed come from a tightly-stretched piece of fishing line tacked across the door. Petyr just stood there. Maybe she had imagined it after all, but she watched anyway as Petyr brought one hand up to scratch his neck.

“Jaime,” she whispered, not sure why and certain he couldn’t even hear her.

He did, and immediately stepped close. “What is it?”

She pointed. “Petyr.”

The oily-voiced weasel spun then, slowly and deliberately, his eyes wide and his mouth open. He clutched his neck. Between his fingers was the feathered end of a dart with black and yellow stripes painted on. The wasp.

She and Jaime rushed over catching Petyr, just as he collapsed. His chest rose and fell too quickly as he gasped in precious air, and his eyes rolled back in their sockets. The heaving ceased all at once. She used her teeth to pull a glove off, fumbling for his pulse which was so very slow, slow, slow then gone.

“He’d dead.” Jaime actually sounded surprised.

Arianne did not scream. Brienne wondered why and looked up at the girl who had stopped clutching Jorah. Instead, she’d gone completely pale and still, her red lips parted as she stared.

“I think she’s in shock,” Brienne muttered, settling Petyr on the cold marble floor so she wouldn’t have to touch him anymore.

A grinding sound of stone on stone filled the space, the floor seeming to echo the noise from within. Jaime stood and grabbed Brienne’s hand. Arianne snapped from her stupor and returned to clutching Jorah’s coat by the lapels. He’d said nothing and hadn’t moved. His eyes were even more glazed. This was not mere drink.

“Jaime, look at his eyes,” she whispered.

The velvet rope in the middle of the room began to swing wildly back and forth.

“The Moon Door is opening!” Arianne shrieked.

Brienne moved to look, some sort of sick fascination wanting to see the gaping hole, but Jaime
stepped in front of her and stared straight into her eyes. “Don’t. We’re leaving.”

She nodded but still looked over at the widening circle that revealed glimpses of night-blackened mountain. It was a terrifying sight. She knew what it meant, and so did Jaime.

He wound his fingers tightly with hers and dashed toward the entry. “Arianne! Jorah! Move, now,” he called behind him.

“Wait,” Brienne pleaded, watching Jorah’s sluggish movement as he appeared to notice the Moon Door for the first time, grinning at it oddly.

Arianne dropped his lapels and stepped away, but Jorah grabbed her. “No, I’ll kee…keep you safe. I…swear…” His head bobbed a little, back and forth.

“It’s one of us, I know it!” Arianne cried, pushing Jorah away with both hands.

She darted past Brienne and Jaime standing near the entry door, and this time, Jaime didn’t move to stop her. Instead, they both watched as Jorah stumbled against the low half-wall around the Moon Door, his arms flailing.

“Grab my arm!” Jaime shouted.

She held onto him for dear life as they rushed over to Jorah. It was too late. They were mere feet away, Jaime’s hand outstretched and ready to save him as Jorah closed his eyes and tumbled backward, over the velvet rope and out into space.

The Moon Door remained open.

Jaime turned and shoved her, hard. “Out! Now!”

They held on to one another as they ran from the deadly room, not looking back even once. The cold of the entry was welcome, but Jaime didn’t stop there. He headed straight for the drawing room, halting only when they were inside and the door shut as tight as it could be. There was no sign of Arianne.

“Oh gods, Jaime, look…” Brienne stared at the table by the fire, by Pycelle’s body.

On it were three pistols neatly aligned.

“Are we meant to kill each other now? Is that our fate?” Brienne felt like weeping. She would never kill again, and it was laughable that she would ever think to kill Jaime.

“But that doesn’t fit…” he mumbled before moving quickly to the framed poem and the figurines.

He recited every line under his breath, stopping at, “One lost his footing and then there were four.”

It reminded Brienne of Jorah, as it couldn’t fail to do. “His eyes, Jaime. Did you see?”

“Yes.”

“He’d been drugged. How else could our host ensure he would lose his footing?” Brienne noticed the fallen figurines, and two more had been laid down. “It had to be Petyr’s bourbon.”

“Petyr is dead, and he said it came from the plane.” Jaime sounded dubious of his own claim.

“Then another dart, one Jorah didn’t notice as it happened. It might have been him because he was
standing near the Moon Door.”

“It’s possible, but I’m not worried about that right now.” Jaime’s eyes skimmed the rest of the poem. “The guns don’t fit. Everything has fit like the most perfect battle plan, but those guns don’t.”

“Maybe he’s gone off the plan. Maybe we’re too chaotic to manipulate now there’s only four of us.”

“Brienne…” he paused, his brow furrowing and his hand gripping hers so tightly the circulation was nearly cut off. “Does this seem random to you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Murderers. Just ten disconnected murderers and some insane host who thinks himself a judge. It makes no sense. Every step of this madness has been planned, we’ve seen that. Even those guns are sure to have a place. Why?” He turned to her, a look of desperation in his eyes.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, lowering her lids to seal herself from his image. “I don’t know.”

“It’s the next one, I think. You see?”

Her eyes snapped open, darting to the poem. *A red herring swallowed one…*

He went on before she could reply. “It’s Arianne or Ryman. One of them doesn’t belong, doesn’t fit the pattern whatever it is. They’ll be the red herring meant to throw us off, maybe that’s what those guns are for, and our kind host has been pointing that out all along. It’s all right here.”

He was missing a very crucial point. “Jaime…how do you know the next one will be Arianne or Ryman?”

“Oh, course it will…” his eyes clouded, his features smoothing from puzzlement into a mask of terrible realization. He hadn’t considered it, not once. He’d thought the two of them would be the last standing.

She would be warmed by his confidence in her strength if it weren’t so misplaced just then.

“No.” He shook his head, his voice rising in volume with every subsequent word. “No, it won’t be us. It won’t. I will not allow it!”

She grabbed his arms to force him still. “We must find him, Jaime. That’s the only hope we have.”

He ran his hand through his golden hair, streaked with silver now with more likely to come after this experience. If they lived. “It’s the poem, I know it. He’s telling us. And how does he know what we’ve done? I’m public record, obviously. And probably Doctor Pycelle and Ilyn Payne. Arianne and Jorah. But what of you, Brienne? How does he know about you?”

“He can’t know. Only you know.” It came out sounding as desperate as she felt.

“I’ve never told a single soul. I swear it.” She was relieved to hear it, and his earnestness was like a knife twisting in her chest as she grew even more consumed with the prospect of his loss.

“I know, Jaime. I know you never did.” Her voice was choked, and she kissed him before she knew what she intended.

He wrapped his arms around her. It was foolish; it might kill one or both of them to steal a moment like this. Neither of them cared. He might still believe there was a chance for them, but hope had begun to fade in her. This, too, might be the last time. She kissed him harder until they couldn’t
breathe, and then she buried her face against his neck.

A thump sounded above them. The guest rooms were up there, and so was Ryman Frey. If he’d stayed put. They broke apart reluctantly and glanced at the ceiling. Jaime looked back at her, placed his warm palm against her cheek and stared into her eyes.

“We search then. Top to bottom, every door. If that fails, we lure him out, we find a place to hide and we wait.” He rubbed his thumb over her cheek and kissed her so quickly it might have been a dream. “Stay with me, always.”

She nodded. “Yes. Always.”

The thump sounded again, and a shout. They moved back to the entry, but just as Jaime stepped through the door, he turned around. “The pistols. They might be rigged but we shouldn’t leave them just in case.”

She nodded and turned, expecting him to follow right behind. The door slammed shut. She spun and pounded on, shouting, “Jaime!”

She thought he might have tried to trap her inside, to keep her there while he went off on some fool’s errand to find their host and get himself murdered, but she could hear her own name shouted, made faint through the thick wood of the door. It had been closed remotely then. He wanted them separated. She kicked the wood, and she felt Jaime do the same, but the door did not budge nor splinter. This one wouldn’t, she knew somehow.

She could barely breath, knowing this meant she would never see Jaime again. They would both die on this godsforsaken mountain, and she had never told him that she loved him. Why hadn’t she thought of it? Just moments ago, she could have said it and she’d failed.

“Jaime!”

Her name floated through yet again, but he couldn’t stay there in the open.

“Move away!” she commanded as loudly as she could. “Get out!”

She heard something else from him, and then there was a distant, muted shout. Not from him. It might be Ryman. The kicking on the door stopped, and she knew Jaime had moved away. She leaned her back against the door and slid down, hugging her knees. She could picture him running up the stairs, his long legs carrying him quickly, hellbent on finding their would-be murderer before her life was taken. He wouldn’t know either. The whole way, he wouldn’t be sure if she’d been killed in the drawing room.

Maybe it was better to die here. She didn’t know how she could live with herself once Jaime was dead.

A faint click sounded. Brienne rose immediately, her hands clenched by her sides. She knew the sound and cursed herself for failing to realize that she and Jaime had not been alone in the drawing room.

She took a cautious step forward, then another, until she could see into the piano alcove where Arianne Martell stood pointing a cocked pistol straight at her. The girl’s hands shook and her pupils were blown wide.

“Don’t you see?” Arianne’s voice shook as much as her hands. “This is the end. I was right before. We’re supposed to kill each other, because we’re all murderers. Don’t you see?”
Brienne pitied the girl. The shock had warped her mind a little, or maybe she was always this way. She had killed her lover. “The poem, Arianne. If you kill whoever’s left, there’s still the poem.”

Arianne waved the pistol at Brienne, her features twisting in anger. “Don’t try to trick me! I know what I’m supposed to do.”

Brienne shouted, “He went out and hanged himself, and then there were none. None, Arianne. If you manage to outlive us all, you will still die. He won’t let you live.”

“I’ll kill him, too. There are three guns. I’ll kill him myself when he comes for me.” One of Arianne’s hands let go of the gun to wipe her brow.

Brienne considered rushing her, pushing her against the piano to stop her, but the gun might go off. If it were even loaded. It was a risk she wasn’t willing to take unless she had no other option.

“Arianne…listen to me, please. We are not enemies. He is the enemy, and the longer we all survive, the longer we have to find him. Jaime’s out—”

“I heard you!” Arianne yelled. “You knew him before. You’re together, you and him. It will be easier to kill him if you’re dead. He won’t be rational.”

“And you are?” Brienne knew it was the wrong thing to say, but she was enraged at Arianne’s cold plan to murder Jaime.

“I want to live!” the girl shouted so loudly the piano strings vibrated.

Brienne took one step forward, her hands up but planning how to wrench the gun out of the girl’s hand.

“No further! In fact…” Arianne took a step back, further into the alcove.

And then she fired. The gun had been pointing straight at Brienne’s chest. She looked down, wondering how death could feel so…absent. How she was not numb or in pain. She was shocked that her coat was not pierced. There was no spreading circle of blood to mark Arianne’s success. The pistol must not have been loaded.

No, something fired. She’d heard it. She looked up, expecting to see a bewildered or enraged Arianne, but instead, she took in the scene before her and immediately wanted to be sick. She was as weak as Theon, she told herself, forcing her stomach to calm.

The gun had fired, but it had malfunctioned. The powder had ignited so close to Arianne that she had a black, bleeding hole in her neck as her body sprawled half on the piano. The gun must have been rigged. The others might be, too.

Brienne ignored the three dead murderers in the room and moved to examine the remaining guns. She hadn’t noticed the names on the handles. Jaime Lannister on one. Ryman Frey on the other.

No Brienne Tarth. There was no gun meant for her. Did that mean she was next? But Arianne had one and was now dead. This was a mind game. Their host would not be so simple about his moves. She stifled her nausea and stepped over to pick up the gun Arianne’s dead hand had dropped. Arianne Martell.

She needed Jaime. He might understand what this meant, or perhaps it meant nothing and was just to confuse. But the poem…Jaime had said the next to go was the red herring. He’d said it would be Arianne or Ryman. There was something there, maybe subconscious even to him, but there
nonetheless.

So she was left with only Jaime and Ryman still alive. Was that the intent? Something she’d thought earlier came rushing back, something about Sybell Spicer. The woman had been summoned here for her role as a conspirator in the murder of Robb Stark. Brienne herself had killed Catelyn Stark. Two Starks dead among ten victims. And Ryman Frey had been responsible for Edmure Tully’s death. She didn’t know why she hadn’t made the connection before, but Edmure had to be a relative of Catelyn’s.

But no, it couldn’t be that. Jaime had killed a Targaryen, and the others had no connection either. It was fancy to try to make sense of chaos.

A louder shout filtered through the door. *Jaime.*

She gathered the two clean pistols, shoving them in her pockets, just in case, and returned to kicking the door. She heard running from beyond, and shouting.

How was the door still locked? It had been automatic, another transmitter. She felt around the frame for any sort of device, anything like a wire or…

Her fingers brushed over a tiny box. It felt like plastic. She ripped it from the door and stepped on it until it was crushed into a hundred pieces. The door didn’t budge.

The running faded, and she moved to the window facing the front of the lodge. It was high and thick old glass, but she was tall enough to see out, to see Theon Greyjoy’s body and to see two figures slowly moving across the space. One was Jaime.

Relief flooded her. She found her old candlestick and dragged a chair over, standing on it and bashing the candlestick against the window until it shattered.

For once in her life, she was glad of her mannish strength as she pulled herself up onto the stone window ledge. Her palms bled from jagged glass, but she didn’t care. She pushed herself through the window and dropped into the snow, running after Jaime.

“Jaime!” she shouted, over and over quickly realizing he was moving far too slowly.

He stopped finally, his chest heaving and his left leg supporting his full weight. He waited for her. She wrapped him in her arms as she watched Ryman Frey halt as well, barely able to suck in air.

“What’s happened?” she asked, glancing between the two men.

“The giant ass stabbed me in the leg!” Jaime snarled, glaring at Ryman.

“I have to get out! He’s coming!” Ryman squealed like a caught pig.

Jaime stood up straight, trying to shake her hands off. “You’ve just realized this now!”

“Arianne is dead.” Brienne interrupted.

Jaime whispered just loud enough for her to hear. “The red herring?”

“I don’t know. She was in the drawing room. She used a pistol, but it backfired. The handles were named, except for me.” She withdrew the two pistols and showed him.

He stared at the names before taking the one marked for Ryman, putting it in his pocket and beginning to mumble the poem again.
“Well I’m not standing here anymore!” Ryman barked out. “I’ll find another way. There has to be another path.”

He waddled back toward the lodge, this time skirting the perimeter as he searched for outlets that didn’t exist.

Jaime’s face cleared, the green of his eyes sharpening. He’d figured it out. “Brienne…”

There seemed to be no end of stony interruptions to their exchanges. This time, the grinding noise was far off and hard to pinpoint because of the echo and the wind. She thought it might be from the bridge, but there was nothing visibly different.

Ryman was standing at the edge, examining the cliff as if he thought to rappel down. She wasn’t sure why, but she looked up.

“Ryman!” she shouted. “Move!”

Jaime stared where she pointed, at a place on the roof where age-old stone statues acted as sentries against the wind. One was moving, grating towards the roof’s edge.

“Ryman!” Jaime shouted.

He glanced over and cursed at them. He must not be able to hear the stone above the whipping wind by the cliff’s edge. There was no time to run over and push him away.

The statue toppled down, plummeting into the snow with a terrific crash, right on Ryman Frey.

“Oh gods,” Brienne muttered, turning away from the grisly scene.

Jaime began dragging her toward what was left of Ryman.

“We don’t need to see this, Jaime.”

“Just a glimpse. Just to be sure.” He stopped only close enough to see the shape of the statue. “A big bear hugged one.”

The statue was in the form of a large northern bear with claws outstretched and buried in the snow.
“How did you know, Jaime?” she asked suddenly.

“What?”

“You knew we’d be the last. How?” She wasn’t sure if she really wanted to learn what he’d figured out, but if there was any hope of survival left, she couldn’t remain ignorant.

He shook his head. “A feeling. Instinct. I think…it’s not important now. We have to find him, immediately.” He took her hand, instantly noticing the slickness of blood.

She’d forgotten about her hands as she’d run to him. “It’s nothing.”

He stroked his thumb over the deepest cut before scavenging in his pockets for a handkerchief and wrapping it around her palm. “Cuts won’t kill you.” His voice was soft and worried, and not about her shallow wounds.

He kept hold of her as they returned to the lodge, leaving the door panel swinging behind them. A small table was set in the middle of the entry, right under the skylight. They looked at each other. There was no point in ignoring it, so they approached this new torment.

The table was decorated with party horns and confetti, two flutes of champagne, two tiny silver vials, and two envelopes with their names written in heavy black ink.

“Nothing for it,” Jaime said, picking up his envelope and using his teeth to tear it open. He left a thumbprint inked with her blood.

She retrieved hers and instantly streaked it with red. She ignored it. A card made of heavy stock was inside, the gold lining of the envelope reflecting the moonlight as she withdrew the card.

The only salvation for a murderer is sacrifice.

Kill the one you love with mercy or he will be killed in agony.

Her hands began to shake as the card fluttered to floor. Not this. Not again. This was why she’d killed Catelyn Stark, why she was a murderer. When she and Jaime had returned to Catelyn after failing to find the woman’s missing daughters, when those poor girls had been presumed dead and they had been recalled to the city, Catelyn had given her the same choice.

The woman’s red hair had gone grey from her pain. She’d taken to living in a cabin in the woods, unable to face the prospect of all her children dead. She’d gone mad. She’d blamed Brienne for it all and had surprised them when they arrived, a gun in one hand, pointing at Jaime’s head, and a coiled rope in the other. She’d demanded that Brienne hang herself or she would murder Jaime to take from Brienne what she held dear, just as Catelyn’s daughters had been taken from her. Brienne had never understood how Catelyn had known.

They weren’t together, before. He’d only kissed her after, after she’d shot Catelyn and ended the mad woman’s misery, and he’d wrapped Brienne in his arms. She’d had no choice. Catelyn’s finger
had been on the trigger. She’d had no choice.

“What does yours say,” she asked Jaime, to break from her painful reverie.

His card rested on his palm as he stared at it. He crumpled it instantly, shoving it into his pocket before looking at her. “Nothing.”

She smiled in misery, reaching out to touch his cheek. “It’s not nothing any more than mine is nothing.”

He closed his eyes, resting his face against her bloody palm, before looking back at her. “It says things. They are meaningless, and it is nothing. Words are wind.” He turned his gaze to the table, and he picked up one of the silver vials.

If his card had made the same demand, were they simply meant to poison each other’s champagne? That would be far too easy. It would be over in minutes. It would be merciful.

Maybe that sort of death would be all right. Quick and easy. She lifted the other vial and thought that maybe there was another way. If she weren’t alive to fulfill their host’s demand, she couldn’t be used as a pawn to manipulate Jaime. Maybe he could still get out. She had faith in his strength. Maybe he could climb the rocks over the path and fly away.

She raised the vial higher.

Jaime grabbed it from her hand. He pulled the stoppers from both vials with his teeth and poured their contents onto the floor.

“No, Brienne. This isn’t the way.” His eyes were piercing, his jaw set so tightly the muscles ticked. He was staring intently, trying to tell her something.

They were being watched then, or overheard. Of course they were.

“What did your card say, Jaime?”

He smiled. “That I had to die.” He stared even harder, the intense expression in his eyes not matching his cocky grin.

“No, Jaime. I can’t…” I can’t think of your death. Anything but that.

“The poem.” His voice was rough and insistent. “I suppose this was inevitable. We can’t both survive.”

But he knew neither of them were meant to live. He knew that. The poem…One betrayed the other, and then there was one.

Jaime would not betray her. She knew it in her soul, and that was what he told her with his eyes. He was making a play, silently begging her to understand.

He grinned in the dim light. “Well, we are supposed to be sitting in the sun. I’ll be glad my grave isn’t sealed away in here.” He nodded almost imperceptibly toward the door.

He wanted her outside. She hoped to the Seven that he really had a plan and wasn’t tricking her into believing he did. They knew each other too well. He could easily be intent on actually dying out there to give her a better chance. He wouldn’t warn her of it, either. She would hardly have time to stop him.
But it was the poem. They must obey the poem. He led her out into the wind and the moonlit snow outside the door. They walked slowly as she tripped more than once. He stopped in the middle, between the door and the bridge and just far enough that no one inside the house could hear.

He kept his voice low. “Do you understand? I have to die, Brienne. You have to be the last. It was always meant this way.”

And finally, finally she did understand. It was risky, and she saw clearly how much he understood that risk. He was risking her, to save her, but it was the only way. She withdrew the gun from her pocket. It had his name on it.


She answered his urgent smile with a nod and raised the gun, aiming so, so carefully.

“I love you,” she whispered back.

She fired. He fell back onto the snow as blood began to stain it around him. The gun slipped from her fingers, and she turned to the lodge without looking back though every cell in her body was screaming for her to go to him, to make certain she’d hit her mark and nothing else.

Her feet propelled her up the steps and through the door automatically. She felt nothing. Her mind was out there in the snow covered in blood, and when she saw the door to the throne room open, with bright electric light seeping out, she moved toward it without hesitation.

Petyr’s body was gone. The Moon Door was still open, and behind it was a small scaffold. Just a step really, and a pole with a noose hanging from it. One little murderer left all alone; she went out and hanged herself, and then there were none.

It was exactly as it had been before, when Catelyn had intended Jaime to be shot and her to be hanged. She moved to the scaffold and waited there below the step.

It wasn’t a long wait. A swinging panel appeared in the alcove next to the other hidden niche. There were no spider webs there, just artificial light and several machines, and Petyr Baelish gliding out onto the marble with a wicked grin.

“I wasn’t sure you’d do it, you know,” he said, coming to a halt on the other side of the Moon Door. Her words were ashes in her mouth. “You gave me no choice.”

“Oh, there is always a choice.” He grinned. “For instance, you and Jaime could have wandered here for ages, or at least until midnight, and we would have killed you then. Slowly. Painfully.”

He was baiting her with that “we.” She refused to bite. “I didn’t suspect you. I admit that.”

His grin grew wider. He reached into his pocket and held up the wasp dart, twirling it between his fingers. “Of course not. I was murdered.”

“How did you do it? I felt your pulse fade and disappear.” She hoped she could buy time, keep him from pushing her towards the noose.

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“There are drugs for that. Simple really.” He leaned cockily on the half wall, completely unafraid of the gaping hole. “Aren’t you going to ask why? That’s the best bit.”

Anything to keep him talking, to buy time. “All right, why?”
He raised his hands as if to the heavens, his sly smirk growing. “For love.”

She immediately thought of Jaime, but Petyr would certainly not refer to that. “Aren’t you clever, every word as bait to make me seem stupid.”

“You are stupid, you ugly bitch.” The grin transformed into a vile sneer. “You killed her, and for that you will die.”

*The Starks*, Jaime had said.

“How do you know?” she asked her executioner. “There was no one else there.”

He dropped his hands to his sides and stood tall and defiant. “I love this modern age. Conveniences at every turn. You see, I was on the telephone with her.” His eyes glazed over as he sank into memory. “She’d called, weeping for her daughters. I almost told her then, about Sansa, but she was so distraught. There was a knock on the door. She told me to wait, and that when she came back, she’d have payment for her girls. I heard you, Brienne Tarth. I heard you.”

So he knew everything, about Catelyn’s death and Jaime’s words of relief and affection once it was done. He knew all.

She took a deep breath. *Time*. She needed more time. “What of the others then? If this was about me, what of them?”

“You and Jaime Lannister,” he growled. “But the others, let’s discuss.” He waved his hand, gesturing for her to speak first.

“Sybell Spicer. She ensured Robb Stark’s death.”

“Very good. Catelyn’s firstborn.” He began to pace in front of the Moon Door. “The boy who should have been my son.”

He’d said *love* but she hadn’t really grasped it until then. Petyr had been in love with Catelyn Stark, the mad woman. The dead woman.

She continued. “Ryman Frey sent Edmure Tully to the gallows.”

He grinned at her. “Perhaps you are only a little stupid. Here’s a tricky one…Theon Greyjoy?”

“I don’t know. He killed a Doctor?”

“Yes, so he did. He also killed Catelyn’s boys. Did you know that? Did she tell you?” He stopped his pacing.

Brienne was genuinely shocked. “Those boys disappeared like the girls. There was another search for them.”

“And they were not found. Do you know why she didn’t tell you? It was shame. After her husband’s trial and execution, she went south to stop Robb from taking revenge, so he too would not be imprisoned. She left her boys up north. She left them, and her girls were gone, too. It was shame. And Theon took advantage, tried to claim Ned’s business and had to stop her boys from inheriting.”

Things began to make more sense. *The Starks*, Jaime had said.

“Ilyn Payne was an executioner,” she offered.
“He killed Ned Stark.” Petyr took up the pacing, sneering at the mention of Catelyn’s dead husband.

She knew Ned had been tried and found guilty of treason for using his government position to sell military secrets. Catelyn had said he’d been set up. His execution had begun the Stark’s miseries. The only man who had been on his side was the Prime Minister, Robert Baratheon, until he died from a medical procedure…

“Doctor Pycelle,” she said.

The album. The newspapers must have been forced not to print the Prime Minister’s name connected to Pycelle, instead publishing a generic death of a generic illness.

“Well,” Petyr wagged his finger back and forth, “in a way. Pycelle certainly killed Robert Baratheon on the table, but of course, the idiot would not have died if a certain Lannister wife had not administered a conflicting drug beforehand.”

Was that Jaime’s connection? His sister had been married to Robert before she and her eldest son had met their own deaths. It was all connected, every bit of it. “Did you somehow cause the car accident that killed Cersei and Joffrey Baratheon? Was that a…test run for us?”

The corner of Petyr’s mouth twisted up. He looked like a fox. “They died because of Ned Stark. I wasn’t responsible, no. Tell me, do you know what your beloved Jaime did?”

“He killed Aerys Targaryen to save hundreds of others,” she stated, her heart beating faster and faster as the time seemed to move too quickly.

What if her aim had been off? What if…

“That’s not it at all,” Petyr shouted. “Jaime is the only Lannister left alive responsible for Ned Stark’s framing. And he needed to die so you would die. Very simple.”

“Jaime had nothing to do with that. It was his father.”

“And his father is dead. There must be blame.” Petyr glared, but she could see how he tensed over mention of Ned.

He hated Catelyn’s husband, so why did he bring people here to die because of a man he hated?

She pressed him further. Time. “What of Tyrion then? He was more involved than Jaime.”

Petyr paced away for just a moment, his expression shadowed. “Tyrion could not be found.”

“So you settle then? Any Lannister will do despite being innocent?” she shouted as her words echoed from stone to stone.

“All Lannisters are guilty. All. Tyrion Lannister will be dealt with.” He waved her off, dismissing her.

“And Jorah? Arianne?” She forced herself not to glance at the open door.

“Arianne was simply the red herring. I think you knew that. Oh, she certainly killed, but it was no one important.” He stopped his nervous movements and stared up at her. “Jorah Mormont was incidental. He wronged Ned Stark long ago. It wasn’t my decision.”

There it was again, an implied partner, a we. She had to ask this time, before there was no time left. This should have been over by now.
“Whose decision was it then?” Her voice was quiet and afraid, and she didn’t need to feign it.

Petyr’s smile grew even more wicked. “I was so hoping you’d ask.” He glanced at the niche where he’d been hiding. “Come out, my love. Time to watch the show.”

A girl stepped out, her eyes cold and her hair a blazing red. She was the image of a young Catelyn Stark before the madness twisted her features. The girl smoked a cigarette she held between delicate fingers.

Brienne’s gut clenched. “Sansa Stark,” she whispered to herself and to the gods.

The girl came to a stop next to Petyr, their backs to the door. “So you’re my mother’s killer. I’ve waited so long to meet you.”

Brienne noted Petyr’s enrapt expression as he looked at the Stark girl, presumed dead for years. “You had her, all this time.”

“I protected her!” Petyr shouted, the words echoing out the Moon Door. “They were coming for her, the Lannisters and everyone else. I kept her safe.”

Sansa placed a gentle hand on Petyr’s arm. “Of course you did.”

He was as mad as Catelyn. So many twisted minds, but he’d said some things were not his doing. They were Sansa’s.

She looked at the girl, still not twenty years old. “Why have you done this? What good does it do you?”

Sansa sighed before puffing on her cigarette. “Do you know that I have nothing left in this world but dear Petyr? All my brothers are dead, and my sister gone, probably dead too. The Lannisters would have ransomed me, and my sister, to gain control of my father’s holdings.”

Brienne couldn’t hold her tongue. “That’s absurd. This isn’t the old world anymore. You were told lies.”

“And what lies do you believe, you who swore to my mother to protect her children only to kill her yourself? Lannister lies for a Lannister whore. And now it’s time for your sentence.” Sansa blew her smoke toward Brienne, but it was sucked out the Moon Door.

A shadow hovered by the entry, a sliver of dark against the incandescent light.

Brienne struggled to hold Sansa off. “What will become of you then? If you have nothing and have locked yourself up here with dead people? You must have been seen coming here…the cable car operator, someone in town.”

Sansa smiled a chilling smile. “I was seen. I made certain of it, and they have seen me before, with Petyr. He has a share in this place, you know.”

Brienne saw nothing but calculation in the girl’s eyes.

Sansa turned to Petyr, grasping his chin with one hand in a gentle tug. Petyr’s eyes blazed with madness, and Sansa kissed him full on the mouth as her smoke clouded around their faces.

“I thank you Petyr, for all you have done.” She wore no smile. “And for all you will do. You see, darling, I was brought here so often by an older man who had known my mother. He loves me
because I look like her. It's quite tragic, isn't it?

“And he tried so hard to take revenge for those who wronged me. He killed so many. I had to do it, Petyr. It's what I will tell them when they find me all alone up here. I will huddle in a corner with ripped clothes, and I will tell them I had no choice when he tried to claim his reward.”

Petyr only had a second to understand, his rapturous gaze melting into fury and agony before Sansa Stark pushed him out the Moon Door in a cloud of smoke. His yell echoed between the rocks until there was nothing.

Sansa turned to Brienne. No more time left now.

“Place the noose around your neck, Brienne Tarth.”

“What then, Sansa? What will you do when you can’t find Tyrion Lannister, and his shadow will hang over you for the rest of your life? You can’t kill them all.” Brienne stared straight into the girl’s merciless eyes.

The shadow from the entry grew.

“No, I can’t kill them all just as they failed to kill all Starks. I am still alive. But Tyrion Lannister will die. He is the last.” A puff on the cigarette, then another. “He doesn’t want to be found, but he will come, I think. For his brother’s funeral. He will come to say goodbye, and I will be there in mourning for the pain my twisted would-be lover has caused. A kind word, a smile for a hideous dwarf, that’s all it will take I think. I’ll have my chance.”

He stepped inside with movements so quiet they didn’t sound on the marble floor. Brienne refused to fix on it for fear of giving him away, despite the heady feeling of relief filling her chest. Her aim had not failed.

“It’s over for you.” Sansa drew a gun that had been tucked into the waistband of her black skirt. Brienne hadn’t seen it before. “Put the noose on.”

“Or what, you’ll shoot her?” Jaime’s snide voice filled the throne room, his own pistol raised and his right shoulder bloody from Brienne’s flesh wound.

Sansa spun around, aiming her gun at Jaime. “How…what are you doing?”

“Well, first, I’m not dead.” He gave a slight bow. “Second, I’m really not going to allow her to be killed, so I think you should set that gun down. We’ll walk away, Sansa. We’ll leave, and you can play out your sick little story and rock in a corner with your false tears.” He didn’t mention Tyrion.

Brienne had thought there would be more. Some escalation of violence or attempt to kill her, but no. It was over so quickly, almost before she could blink.

Sansa fired, and so did Jaime. He staggered. More blood bloomed on his coat as she raced around the Moon Door to get to him. He didn’t fall, not even when she wrapped one arm around him and prepared herself to shatter from the pain of this. Her free hand fluttered over him, and she said things, but she wasn’t sure what.

“Just another flesh wound,” he ground out. “She’s not as good a shot as you.” He winked at her.

She couldn’t keep the tears or the laughter in, though it had only been seconds. She looked at Sansa. The girl’s arm was limp by her side, the gun on the floor. Her cigarette had fallen. Her lithe hand clutched her stomach, red staining her porcelain skin. She gaped at them, her brow furrowed in
confusion, and then she fell backward, out into the sky to join her lover.

She was surprised to feel pain for the girl. They had searched so long for her, and she had lived with the failure of it for years. Knowing now that Sansa had been corrupted only made that failure harder to bear.

“Brienne, look at me,” Jaime demanded, placing his palm against her damp cheek. “It’s not your fault. Nothing is your fault.”

She wasn’t certain she’d ever believe that, but she’d at least try.

He kissed her roughly. “And we survived.”

“Oh my gods, we survived.” She was nearly shaking from the sudden freedom from danger. _He’s alive._ She smiled. _We’re alive._

Jaime kept his grip on her as he moved to the second hidden niche where Sansa had been hiding. There were switches and wires filling the space, and Jaime pulled one that read **Station** and another that read **Car**.

“Jaime, your wounds, are you…”

“They’re fine,” he assured despite a quick twitch. “Just my shoulder. Twice. I’ll get it looked at once we’re off this damned mountain, hence the cable car.”

“What if it’s still electrified?”

“I think this has fixed it,” he said. “But I don’t know. We could radio for help.”

She glanced back at the Moon Door. “They’ll think we did this, Jaime. All the bodies…”

He peered out into the space where three people had died. Three more lay in rest in the drawing room, and two outside. Even Sybell was visible on the rocks from the upstairs window.

“You heard what Sansa planned, how she would remain alive here, to be found innocent.” He smiled ruefully. “My vote is for Theon.”

“You want to frame a dead boy for this?” Brienne wasn’t sure if she was shocked or impressed.

“That dead boy is a murderer. As are all the others, including us, Brienne. Better he takes the fall. No one would believe the truth.” He gripped her hand and brought it to his lips. “Besides, what’s the use of surviving if we go to prison? I doubt they would arrange conjugal visits between felons.”

Brienne felt her hated blush creep over her skin, and despite the plan’s inherent dishonesty, she couldn’t bring herself to object. All she wanted was to leave this awful place with Jaime.

She sighed deeply. “All right. What do you want to do?”

He grinned. “Unlike everything else that’s happened here, it’s very simple.”

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It was just after dawn, and Brienne stood at the window of the inn’s tiny corner room, letting the orange light bathe her skin. It was the New Year, the one they weren’t supposed to be alive to greet. The inn at the bottom of the mountain housed only a few other guests. All was calm and quiet.
For several hours before, the Eyrie Lodge had been so illuminated that it could be seen from the valley, and the gondolas had run almost continuously. It would a fantastic story in the morning papers, the first great scandal of the year. *Four found dead in Eyrie Murder Spree, Two Survive.*

The gondola operator had given a statement that eleven people had gone up the mountain, so the police had assumed with only partial accuracy that those who had not been found had been pushed through the Moon Door which had remained open.

Since Arianne’s gunshot wound and Ilyn’s poisoning could not be disguised, they had been carried to the throne room to join their real killers in their graves. Brienne did not cry for them.

Down with those bodies had gone the radio transmitters, the poem and the figurines, the name cards, the notes, the album, and all but Jaime’s pistol with the name scraped off. Everything that could suggest a carefully laid out plan.

Instead, a pillow had been found next to Doctor Pycelle with a button from Theon’s coat trapped in its fringe. The snow beside Ryman’s Frey’s body was stained with a bloody T-H-E…just next to the man’s fat finger. A letter written by Sybell Spicer had been stuffed into Theon’s pocket, desperately written to her daughter that Doctor Pycelle had been murdered. It was unfinished. And Jaime’s pistol was placed in Theon’s hand. Then they had radioed for help.

The police had believed a twice-wounded Jaime and a pale Brienne when they were found waiting by the bridge, huddled together against the cold. Brienne had taken the fall for Theon. She’d stated outright that she’d killed Theon with the axe as they ran from him, spotting the weapon by the wood pile.

It was all very clean, very simple. The only piece left hanging was the weight of guilt that would rest on Brienne’s shoulders for the rest of her life. Jaime’s too, though he wouldn’t admit it aloud. He wasn’t as serious as she, wasn’t as prone to brooding about things that couldn’t be changed.

They’d been wrapped in blankets and bundled into a gondola with an officer, all sympathetic words and promises to wrap it all up in mere hours. Jaime had received attention for his two bullet wounds, and she for her cut palms. Their suitcases had been inspected for the sake of thoroughness and brought to them intact. They didn’t have to pay for the hot meal hastily prepared in the middle of the night, or their one room. Only the innkeeper’s wife had flashed a look when they’d refused to be parted.

She closed her eyes against the light, surprised how easily she could banish the terrible memories. It wouldn’t last, but after Jaime had insisted his wounds would not prevent him from showing just how happy he was to have survived, she had something brighter to focus on.

The door opened and quickly closed.

“Did you send them?” she asked, glancing over her shoulder as she pulled the edges of her thick robe tighter to ward off the corridor’s chill.

“Sent and out of our hands.”

“I’ll phone my father later, but I didn’t want him to read the papers without knowing.” She should have stayed on Tarth for New Years, but then she wouldn’t have found Jaime again. She couldn’t regret that. “And the other?”

Jaime sighed. “If he’s where I think he is, he should get the telegram by tomorrow. It will be up to him to respond.” He flashed a half-smile, but it was tinged with anxiety.
“He will, Jaime. I know he will.” Brienne hoped Tyrion Lannister would just this once fail to maintain his familial trait of stubbornness and choose instead to reunite with his brother. Jaime needed him.

The second smile was genuine and warm as Jaime shed the clothes he’d hastily put on to go out. “I have you regardless.”

“Of course.” She couldn’t keep her eyes from scanning his body. “Aren’t you cold?”

“Not for long.” He stepped close and pulled her robe apart, wrapping his arms around her.

Yes, it was very easy to bury what had happened, for now.

“And then there were two,” Jaime whispered against the bare skin of her shoulder.

“Don’t ever say that again,” she warned, but she smiled a little anyway.

Chapter End Notes

See, I couldn't kill them! I went with the stage play's version of the ending. No murder for J/B, just banging.

Thanks to everyone for the lovely comments, and CoraleeVeritas had the right guess! Never trust Littlefinger. Evil Bitch Sansa is gifted with love to Mikki, because reasons.

If you enjoyed this little murder spree, I'm pulling together a fun fic fest for March, right before the new GoT season airs. Write your own Christie-inspired fic, or noir, or Victorian penny dreadful! Anything criminal. Go grab or submit a prompt at ASongofMurderandMayhem.tumblr.com!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!